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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000698

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: MINORITY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN TURKEY: A
QUESTION OF APPROACH ON PROPERTY ISSUES

REF: (A) ISTANBUL 202 (B) 2002 ISTANBUL 1627

Classified By: Consul General David L. Arnett for reasons 1.5 (b) and (

d).

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: Recent legal changes in property rights for minority foundations have elicited varied responses from different religious communities in Turkey. The history of Turkish and Ottoman minority communities plays into their respective views on pastoral concerns, political connections, property issues, and outside audiences. Each community's pragmatic calculation of its own best interest accounts for differences in minority community relations with the Turkish Government. END SUMMARY.

The Unbending Greek Position

[12.](#) (C) The Ecumenical Patriarch has the difficult task of occupying the universally acknowledged, but often disregarded, Patriarchal throne of Constantinople and New Rome, recognized as ecumenical outside Turkey, but deprecated by the Turkish state. First among the Patriarchs of all Orthodoxy, his pastoral duties include ministering to millions of diaspora Greeks in the United States (as well as other countries), and a tiny group (around 3,000) of aging Greeks in Istanbul. His flock, which at the turn of the twentieth century numbered over 500,000 in Istanbul alone (and millions throughout Turkey), once owned vast areas in and around Istanbul, including all of Heybeliada, the island which still houses Halki Seminary, currently not permitted to function by the Turkish State.

[13.](#) (C) Given the small size of the Greek Orthodox community in Turkey, the Ecumenical Patriarch is not heavily encumbered with local pastoral obligations. American Greeks, from whom he derives much respect, outside support, and funding, encourage him to remain firm in his insistence on (1) recognition from the Turkish State of his ecumenical status; and (2) reopening Halki Seminary. In a recent submission of lost property to the General Directorate for Foundations, Metropolitan Meliton said the Patriarchate submitted claims for 1,374 disputed properties (other sources say they submitted close to 2,000). In contrast, Armenians submitted less than 400, Jews four, and Chaldeans three.

[14.](#) (U) NOTE: Radikal newspaper reported May 5 that 1593 applications have been submitted to the General Directorate for Foundations so far. Of those, 574 (or 36 percent) of the applications were rejected. Of those property claims rejected, 302 were Greek, 232 Armenian (the article does not differentiate between Armenian Catholic and Orthodox claims), and 13 Jewish. END NOTE.

[15.](#) (C) Additionally, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is considerably less concerned with angering the GoT by voicing objections to outsiders than the Jews or Armenians. After the First World War, Greeks transferred some community properties into the names of private individuals in order to avoid expropriation. The door, however, was closed behind them. Until the most recent spate of legal reforms, a religious community could not make use of these nominally-private properties. In one case, an orphanage was transferred into private hands but could not be further used by the community. Additionally, Turkish law forbade the religious minority communities from gaining property through inheritance, except under special circumstances as determined by the General Directorate for Foundations. To the knowledge of ConGen Istanbul, no community has ever received permission to gain property by inheritance.

[16.](#) (C) With these memories still haunting the Patriarch and his supporters, post believes an unwritten decision was taken

not to pursue any legal loopholes in the future. Rather, the Patriarchate has consistently pressed for explicit legal recognition of their various property claims (reftel). To date, this has not borne fruit. However, with a steadily-shrinking local community and a supportive overseas flock, the Ecumenical Patriarch has considerably less to lose than other religious minorities in confronting the GoT.

Flexible Jewish Policies

17. (C) The Jewish community in Turkey numbers approximately 25,000 people, the vast majority of whom are in Istanbul. The community maintains property primarily on the European side of the city, with a synagogue and other properties also on Buyukada (an island in the Sea of Marmara). Despite the community's size, few legal problems exist, largely due to the flexible approach the community has taken in maintaining its properties.

18. (C) First, the community transfers ownership when necessary to avoid expropriation or other loss. While the Chief Rabbinate has had a historically close relationship with U.S. and Israeli diplomats, it avoids adversarial relations with the Turkish Government. The community avoids formalistic dealing with the General Directorate for Foundations (which all communities assess is not favorably disposed to Jewish or Christian needs to begin with), opting instead to approach elected officials who can bring pressure on the General Directorate's bureaucrats from above. Poloff pointed out to Chief Rabbinate's Lay Vice President Lina Filiba that the community has a history of finding a modus vivendi within Turkish law ("and sometimes outside it," she said) to achieve their goals, while other communities were less flexible. Filiba said that meeting the spiritual needs of their community come first, and the means by which this is accomplished are less important.

19. (C) Unlike the Greeks, the Jewish Community has a younger generation as well as a series of wealthy entrepreneurs who can assist when financial problems come up. Jak Kamhi (Chairman of Profilo Holding), the Garih and Alaton families (founders of Alarko Holding), and others can be depended upon to assist when necessary. Thus, fighting tooth-and-nail for one or two small properties that can bring little monetary compensation at a significant political cost is not their normal practice.

Tending the Armenian Flock

10. (C) Patriarch Mesrob II finds himself in a delicate position: as head of the Armenian Orthodox community in Turkey, he must tend to the needs of his sizeable community (estimated at 65,000 to 70,000 people, now the largest of the Lausanne Treaty minorities) by working with the Turkish Government on practical matters such as minority education policy, church maintenance, and reconstruction of the patriarchate building. At the same time, his working relationship with the GoT often comes under criticism from the Armenian Orthodox Church and the sizeable Armenian diaspora in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere. Reflecting on the question of whether the tragic events that befell Armenians in the closing days of the Ottoman Empire should be called a "genocide" or not, Mesrob has said that the more important work is to focus community energy on healing, building bridges between Turks and Armenians, and moving forward.

11. (C) Mesrob has elected to work publicly with the Government of Turkey. He was the only Patriarch to travel to Copenhagen to voice support for Turkey's EU aspirations in the run-up to the most recent accessions. Publicly voicing pride in his Turkish citizenship, Mesrob has sought to consolidate the position of his community by adopting a non-threatening approach. Recently, when asked by poloff what concerns he had about property issues, Mesrob said that while there were some continuing concerns, the Armenian Orthodox community had no intention of airing the problems publicly, or relying on outside assistance. However, the Patriarch and others have leveled complaints about property issues and complications in working with the General Directorate for Foundations; these complaints are similar to those of other communities.

12. (C) Criticism of GoT policies is balanced with pragmatic

interest in cooperation to improve Armenian community cohesion. For example, in a recent discussion with poloff, Armenian Patriarchal Chancellor Tatul said the community remains interested in recent mother-tongue language laws, and is considering an Armenian-language radio station (if forthcoming regulations permit) in addition to their community newspaper, "Lraper."

Unrecognized Suriyanis

13. (C) Like other sizeable minority communities in Turkey, the Syrian Orthodox were offered Lausanne Treaty status as minorities. Reflecting a spirit of patriotism toward the fledgling Turkish Republic, the Patriarch (then seated in Antakya, biblical Antioch) said that Suriyanis were Turkish citizens, and had no need of minority status, as the constitution would ensure their rights to freedom of religion. Though both the Suriyanis and the GoT may have meant well, this left the community in limbo: not protected by Lausanne, not Muslim, and not foreign nationals. As such, there is effectively no protection for the Syrian Orthodox Church.

14. (C) In the years since Lausanne, much Suriyani church property was expropriated by the GoT. The Tur Abdin area of Southeast Turkey, once home to a huge Suriyani community that emigrated starting in the 1960's owing to hostility on the part of Turkish officials, now has a series of abandoned monasteries and churches where property ownership is in question; perhaps only 400 Suriyanis remain in Tur Abdin. The Patriarch eventually left Turkey for Damascus, leaving behind two Metropolitans (effectively Archbishops), in Istanbul and Midyat, to serve the still-sizeable community. Both Metropolitans show great appreciation for any attention paid to their community and its plight. Seeing the problems that resulted from an effective non-status for many years, they quickly recount the past occasions on which foreign dignitaries and Turkish officials paid them a visit, or even sent letters of congratulations on religious holidays. In Istanbul, Metropolitan Yusuf Cetin speaks with admiration for President Sezer's willingness to visit their church two years ago (the only President of Turkey to do so).

15. (C) Regarding property issues, the Suriyanis claim that much of what has happened in the past is now beyond the scope of the current law. Key monasteries and churches remain in their possession, yet abandoned or expropriated ones have no congregants. Migrations to Syria, Europe and the U.S., and Istanbul have emptied much of their population from the Southeast. Midyat Metropolitan Samuel Aktas says that core concerns of the community are largely met--worship, Aramaic classes, and continued functioning of monasteries. However, when the Suriyanis need to deal with the GoT, they are usually given unwritten approval for requests. Such tacit (versus official) acceptance reflects the Suriyanis' still-unclear status under Turkish law.

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